

Ohio State University Commencement  
Remarks by Christopher Reeve  
June 13, 2003

President Holbrook, Chairman Sofia and the Board of Trustees, distinguished Faculty, Graduates and honored Guests:

Before I begin, you should know that I have enjoyed watching Ohio State football on television for many years, but I never knew what a buckeye was. I always assumed it was a common name for a species of a little known but dangerous wild animal. I recently learned that it's just a tree. At first glance, it appears to be useless: the wood doesn't burn well, the bark smells, and the meat of the nut is bitter and mildly toxic. Yet it grows where others cannot, it's difficult to kill, and adapts to its circumstances. So much for first impressions.

I am extremely honored to address more than 5,000 of you who are graduating from the bachelors, masters and doctoral programs of OSU. I wanted to be here today to pay tribute to the longstanding ideals of the University: compassion for our fellow human beings, the aspiration to be champions in all arenas of life, and the desire to make a difference.

This year marks the 133<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of Ohio State. A quick survey of just a few recent accomplishments shows that the vision of Joseph Sullivant, a member of the Board when the University was founded, has been realized far beyond his expectations. The Diversity Action Plan, which charts the course for OSU to become a model of diversity in higher education, was formulated two years ago. The new Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in the Americas will bring in scholars from around the world to examine issues of racial inequality. The University is ranked in the top 5 in granting doctorate degrees to African-Americans; it has been selected as one of the country's 50 best colleges for African-Americans by *Black Enterprise* magazine; it is also listed among the top 20 institutions for granting doctoral degrees to native Americans and native Alaskans.

At OSU, students and faculty understand the importance of public service on both a local and global scale. Some focus on the environment, others on community outreach among many other programs. Students in the College of Engineering recently achieved a speed of 241 mph in the Buckeye Bullet Electric Car. (Can I put in a request for them to work on my wheelchair?) Students in the Civil Engineering program placed first in a national competition to design a better road pavement using recycled materials.

Participants in the Learning Bridge bring the educational resources of Ohio State to meet the needs of public schools that serve the university neighborhoods. The Family Nutrition Program brings vital information about food safety and nutrition to nearly 92,000 people. This year alone, students in the College of Social Work provided 215,000 hours of service to the central Ohio community. Doctors and scientists at the Ohio State Medical School are among the most respected in the nation, consistently ranking among the leading recipients of research funding from the NIH. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

I salute these Points of Pride to congratulate you for your outstanding achievements. But I also want to sound a note of caution as you leave this sanctuary of learning, self-discovery, and ethical conduct to make your way in the outside world.

You have been taught to work hard, not to cheat, and balance your own advancement with service to others. But when you look beyond this campus, you witness seemingly endless examples of questionable conduct in government, religion, business, the media, and even sports. Our intelligence agencies are being challenged to explain their recommendation for the invasion of Iraq. The Catholic Church is embroiled in a crisis of misconduct and cover-ups. CEOs of major corporations are facing fines and imprisonment for their greed at the expense of the employees who helped create their success. The reputation of one of the most respected newspapers in the country has been severely damaged by a reporter who could not resist plagiarizing in his zeal to succeed. Even the achievements of one of our favorite baseball players will probably be eclipsed by controversy over his use of an illegal bat.

The challenge before you will be to maintain your integrity in a culture that has devalued it. You will have to bring your own personal and professional ethics with you on the journey when you leave here today, because you may not find anyone to guide you. Living a moral life in an indifferent world is likely to be more difficult than you can imagine. How will you succeed?

The answer may be found in a few simple words written by Abe Lincoln: "When I do good I feel good. When I do bad I feel bad. And that's my religion". All of us have a voice inside that will speak to us if we let it. Sometimes it's easy to hear; sometimes we have to turn down the volume of the distracting noise around us so we can listen. That voice tells us if we are on the right track. It lets us know if we give as much as we take, if we welcome the opinions of others, and at least accept diversity even if we are not able to embrace it.

As you go forward, hopefully that inner voice will remind you of some of the Points of Pride that bring such distinction to OSU. You'll discover that you can go far by being conscientious, but you will go farther and find true satisfaction by being conscious. If you have already achieved self-awareness and set specific goals for yourself, that's fine. If you don't know who you are or what to do next, don't worry about it. Your life shouldn't run on a schedule, and you may go down some dead end streets until you find the right road. Don't be afraid to question assumptions you may have lived with since childhood. Take your time and seek true independence as you search for meaning and fulfillment.

Perhaps the greatest reward for living a conscious life is that it prepares you to cope with adversity. If you are open to change and new experiences, if you are accustomed to self-discipline, if you respect others and nurture your relationships, then you will have built a solid platform that will support you and help you deal with anything that comes your way. I'm not saying all of that is easy. But sitting here today I can honestly tell you that you don't need to break your neck to learn the value of living consciously. I was lucky to grow up unthreatened by change and eager for new experiences. Thirty years as an actor before my injury taught me self-discipline and helped me cope with rejection and failure. My marriage and my relationships with friends and family were alive and well before the accident; since then they have grown even stronger and given me the ability to recover and go forward.

That catastrophic event also changed my perspective about other things in life. Outside of my circle of family and friends, I didn't appreciate others nearly as much as I do now. Once I trained with actual paraplegics to portray one in a film. Every evening as I drove away from the rehab center I quickly pushed those suffering patients out of my mind, relieved that I was not one of them. Less than a year later I became paralyzed myself. Did I need to learn something about compassion and humility? No doubt about it.

It was not until I was immersed in my own rehabilitation that I realized an apparent tragedy had created a unique opportunity. Spinal cord patients like the ones I once dismissed were now in the next room, traveling down the same hallways, and struggling right beside me in physical therapy. I came to know people of all ages and from all walks of life that I would otherwise never even have met. For all our differences, what we had in common was our disability and the desire to find a reason to hope. I was

inspired by so many and gradually discovered that I had been given a job that would create urgency and a new direction in my life: I could do something to help.

Thanks to the education you have received here at Ohio State and the ideals that guide this distinguished university, you have already learned some of the most important principles you will ever need to know: compassion for our fellow human beings, the aspiration to be champions in all arenas of life, and the desire to make a difference. To all of you leaving today I can only say, on behalf of all those who will look to you for guidance and leadership, take those principles with you and hold them close.

Congratulations on all your achievements. I wish you the best of luck.